

## **Statement by Erik Jensen, former UN Undersecretary-General**

**November 17, 2005**

**House Committee on International Relations**

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak about Western Sahara, an issue on which I have worked these last twelve years, five of them in the Sahara, where I headed the UN mission from 1994 to 1998. Given today's time constraint, I will keep it short.

The time has come for a negotiated political settlement. The US could help make this happen.

The referendum called for in the UN Security Council settlement plan of 1990-91 has failed to happen – and will not happen. For two main reasons:

One. Both Morocco and Polisario officially agreed to the settlement plan. In reality, however, they agreed to irreconcilable interpretations as to who should vote.

Two. The Security Council never sought to impose a solution, never hinted at sanctions. It simply appealed to the parties to cooperate voluntarily.

When the conflict erupted in 1975 Morocco was in the Western camp, close to the US. Polisario was supported politically and in other ways by Algeria, Libya and Cuba, closer to the other camp. But when the Cold War ended, Security Council Members became optimistic that a political compromise would bridge the contradictions between the parties.

For its part, Polisario demanded an electoral roll based on the census taken in the territory by the Spanish colonial administration in 1974.

Morocco, on the other hand, insisted that there was no distinct 'Western Saharan' identity. Spanish colonialism had created arbitrary sub-divisions. The people belonged to Saharan tribes spread throughout the region, including Southern Morocco, and many were outside of the territory during the census.

Polisario and Morocco did agree to a cease-fire (successfully UN-monitored ever since with only minor violations) and accepted in 1994 to begin the process to get to a referendum. We counted on engagement to build confidence and improve prospects for a negotiated compromise.

But having the parties move toward a referendum was an uphill struggle. Only Secretary Baker's involvement enabled prolonging the original plan until he was forced to the same conclusion that neither party would voluntarily commit to a referendum based on an electoral roll other than the one it had chosen.

Recognizing that the parties would never agree to a common voter list, Baker, supported by the United States, France and others, began trying to get the parties to negotiate

a political solution. Baker's framework agreement, his first proposal, was accepted by Morocco but rejected by Polisario. Baker's second, "peace", plan has not been agreed by Morocco on the grounds that this is not a negotiated political solution, while Algeria and Polisario argue that it should be implemented, indeed Polisario is reported as calling for UN sanctions to impose the plan.

The Security Council has been unwilling to impose it. The international community, through the Council, again makes clear that it will not impose a solution, that it will not resort to sanctions, much less force, to compel Morocco and Polisario and Algeria to act against their perceived interests. It has only recently reaffirmed its commitment to achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution.

This conflict has gone on for thirty years: thousands of Saharans living in refugee camps in extreme desert conditions for a whole generation, hundreds born there. They have virtually no opportunity for gainful employment and no prospects. It is grim; I know from experience. These are fine people who deserve better.

Algeria is acting to put behind it long and vicious civil warfare, in a country of great natural resources and human potential. Morocco has been making significant advances in respect for human rights, freedom of the press and effective democracy but suffers from high unemployment especially among young people. Mauritania, a vast land sparsely populated, with proven reserves of oil, recently experienced a coup. This is a region of enormous potential as well as strategic importance, with reform-minded leaders. It is also highly vulnerable to disruptive elements and Islamic extremism.

Frustration at the lack of progress leading to renewed fighting could have disastrous consequences.

The enduring, costly dispute over Western Sahara remains the greatest obstacle to stability in the region and its development.

In the interest of all, a negotiated political settlement, involving a genuine degree of regional autonomy for Western Sahara, which would be subject to referendum, offers the most credible solution. Morocco's king is now open to that idea. It would recognize the wider political realities and facilitate integration of the Maghreb leading to economic and social development and strengthening security alliances – not only the best weapon in the war against terror but helpful in furthering democracy and tackling serious migration problems.

The United States can help promote such a resolution. It has powerful interests and potential influence in both Morocco and Algeria. I hope this Committee will add its voice to that of the US Administration and the governments of France and Spain and call on Morocco and Algeria to initiate direct negotiations. Talks could explore various successful models for regionalization with varying degrees of autonomy. They need to begin as soon as possible.